Cherished

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/36621103.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	The Sentinel (TV), Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Jim Ellison/Blair Sandburg
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Blair Sandburg, Jim Ellison
Additional Tags:	Discusion Of Murder, Discussion Of Possible Major Character Death, Romance, Alternate Universe - Sentinels and Guides Are Known, Pre-Slash, Sentinel/Guide Bonding, major character illness
Language:	English
Collections:	Every Fandom Reverse Bang 2022
Stats:	Published: 2022-01-28 Words: 12,326 Chapters: 3/3

Cherished

by Desertpoet

Summary

Both Hannibal and Will accepted that they'd never bond until a chance meeting changed everything.

Notes

Written for the 2022 Every Fandom Reverse Bang

Thank you to vMures for doing double duty as both alpha and beta reader. She is awesome, and this story is much better for her input. All remaining mistakes are my own.

Special thank you to kiayea for the beautiful and inspiring art. Without her art there would be no story. All three pieces are wonderful.

- Inspired by Art for "Cherished" by desertpoet by kiayea

Chapter 1

This is the piece that inspired the story.

His whole world was green. The green was everywhere, and it was fascinating. It filled his vision, and he was unaware of anything else. Then something began to intrude. FBI agent Hannibal Lecter frowned as he slowly became aware of a voice calling his name. He blinked and came back to himself with a sudden pop of awareness. Hannibal realized that his temporary field guide and partner Andrea Campbell had her hand on his arm. She was calling his name urgently.

Andrea was a tall slim woman with golden brown skin and a gentle smile. She was also competent, kind, and had a cuttingly sharp wit. Hannibal adored her. There was a part of him that regretted that they weren't compatible as sentinel and guide. But he was grateful she was in his life.

Hannibal looked around and realized he was standing outside the family home of their latest victim. He and Andrea had just finished interviewing his parents. They'd left the house and started back toward the car. Then he'd noticed the way the light glinted on the grass, and he'd focused on it… that was the last thing he remembered except for the color green.

"Hannibal, are you alright?" Andrea asked. "Thank goodness you came out of it. I was getting worried."

Andrea looked at him in concern, but she waited for him to speak. Hannibal tried to smile reassuringly. "I'm alright now, Andrea. Thank you for your help."

Hannibal closed his eyes and took a deep breath to center himself. Zoning was always a little distressing. Good Lord, he'd zoned on a blade of grass of all things. It shouldn't have happened. It

was fortunate that Andrea had been with him. He took stock of his senses. Sounds were a little loud, so he dialed his hearing down a notch to a more comfortable level. All his other senses were working well. He winced and rubbed his temples in an attempt to ease the sudden pounding in his head. After he zoned, he always woke up with a headache that pain medication barely touched. It would be hours before it dissipated.

Andrea blew out a breath. She didn't remove her hand from his arm, but her heartbeat slowed as she relaxed. "You zoned again, Hannibal." Her fingers tightened on his arm. "It was fifteen minutes this time before I could bring you out of it. It's getting worse. The zones are getting longer."

"I know they are," Hannibal said. He shrugged doing his best to appear unconcerned. "But not by much. I'm not sure what else I can do about it in any case. I've tried all the techniques that the foundation suggested."

Andrea frowned worriedly at him, but she let go and stepped back. She had been his partner and guide in the field for over a year. Thankfully, they were good friends as well. She respected that he didn't like to be touched unnecessarily.

Andrea bit her lip. "Have you been meditating every day?" she asked.

"I meditate for two hours every morning and that helps. But it's helping less and less every day," Hannibal admitted quietly.

Hannibal was a powerful sentinel. Sometimes unbonded sentinels lost control of their senses and started zoning regularly, especially the stronger ones. Hannibal knew that over time he would get worse. Someday he could zone permanently. It was a serious concern, but Hannibal tried not to dwell on it. A permanent zone might never happen. In the meantime, he wouldn't let his problems stop him from doing his work.

"What about the medication the doctor at the foundation prescribed? Are you taking them?"

Hannibal sighed. But he kept his voice level. "No, I haven't. I tried them for a month, and not only did they not help, but they dulled my senses so much I couldn't do my job."

"Hannibal," Andrea glared at him. 'You shouldn't stop taking them."

"I gave them a fair shot." Hannibal held up a hand when she started to speak. "But they really do nothing for me, Andrea. You know they don't work for most sentinels. I don't see why I should suffer if they aren't even helping."

"Alright, fair enough," Andrea said with a sigh. "But promise me you'll talk to the doctor about this. Maybe there's something else you can try."

Hannibal didn't have the heart to tell her he already knew there wasn't. Medications that helped with zoning were few, and they didn't work well for everyone. There was one other thing he could try, but Andrea knew better than to bring it up. He was grateful for her concern for his well-being. So, he just nodded and promised he would do as she asked.

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A couple of hours later, he looked over the file for their current case. Four young men had turned up dead over the last four months. The case file was distressingly thin, however. The crime scenes

so far were impeccably clean. Hannibal had tried, but he hadn't been able to pick up any evidence or clues using his senses. Whoever had committed this crime knew how to hide from sentinels. He was still waiting for the report from the crime scene techs on the latest crime scene. Perhaps there would be some sort of lead.

He trusted Beverly Katz. She was an excellent crime scene investigator. If there was anything to find he knew she would find it. Still, the fact that he hadn't been able to find any useful clues was incredibly frustrating. Hannibal kept hoping that he'd see something he had missed in the crime scene photos. So, he kept looking.

Supervisory Special Agent Jack Crawford walked out of his office. The office was above the main floor. He knew that Jack enjoyed keeping an eye on them and everything that happened on the office floor. He looked around the room, and his gaze zeroed in on Hannibal, and he motioned for Hannibal to come to him. Hannibal traded a look with Andrea, who was seated at the desk next to his.

"I'll be right back." Hannibal stood and straightened his tie.

"Good luck," Andrea said with a grin.

Hannibal gave her a mock glare, and her grin widened.

He walked up the steps and entered Jack's office. The office wasn't large, but it had a good-sized window overlooking a small park where employees could get fresh air and eat their lunch in nice weather. Jack's desk took up a large area against the window. The office also had a sofa and a set of file cabinets against one wall. Hannibal knew Jack slept on that sofa often.

Jack was mundane, but he treated all the sentinels and guides under his command well. He was an excellent boss. Hannibal respected him and liked working for him. They had known each other a long time and they worked well together. They weren't friends, but Jack allowed Hannibal certain leeway in their interactions. He'd made sure to do an imprint on the man as a precaution. Hannibal would be able to find Jack anywhere in the city. In fact, Hannibal had an imprint on everyone he worked with closely. It was instinct. He couldn't let any of his people be hurt on his watch.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, come in and close the door."

Hannibal did as Jack asked. Jack was sitting behind his desk, and he motioned Hannibal to one of the visitor's chairs. Hannibal sat down and was careful not to let his wariness show. He already knew that Jack wanted to talk about his zone. It wouldn't be the first time. He knew Jack was concerned for him, but he'd really rather not discuss the matter again. Jack clasped his hands in front of him and stared at Hannibal for a long tense moment before speaking.

"I heard you zoned this afternoon. *Again*." His tone was neutral, but he smelled like anger and worry. Hannibal knew Jack was much more upset than he seemed.

"It was only fifteen minutes, sir" Hannibal protested with a shake of his head. "Andrea was able to bring me out with very little trouble."

Jack leaned forward and met Hannibal's gaze head-on. "I think you can call me Jack for this conversation, *Hannibal.*

He heard the emphasis on his first name and relaxed a little bit. He wasn't going to get yelled at after all. "All right, Jack it is then."

Jack sighed. "This conversation is off the record. I'm worried about you. You're getting worse, and it seems to be progressing. The last time was only ten minutes."

Hannibal was touched by Jack's concern but he kept his face carefully blank. He had zoned two other times when he'd been off duty. Luckily both times had been in public, and he'd been brought out of the zone by someone nearby. Each had been longer than the last. Hannibal had decided not to share that fact with anyone but Andrea and Jack. He was a private person and he didn't like being gossiped about.

Jack sighed and shook his head. "Hannibal, you can't go on like this. What happens if you zone when you're alone and don't come out of it? We both know it's a real possibility."

Hannibal's stomach clenched. He knew it was a possibility, and it worried him, but he didn't know what to do about it. He'd never had the best control over his senses though he did the best he could to compensate for the lack of a bond. The more powerful the sentinel the harder it was to control their senses without a guide. Hannibal knew that he would be an alpha sentinel if he bonded, but he didn't think he'd be the strongest alpha in the region. He was mostly relieved about that. Most sentinels managed their senses well enough. Unfortunately, Hannibal had more trouble than most.

Jack was still watching Hannibal intently. "Look, the zoning isn't affecting your work, at least not yet. Beyond that the bureau has no say in your private life. I can't order you do take my advice. Though I wish I could. That said, you need to find a guide to bond with. You're the best damn profiler I have. I don't want to lose you."

Hannibal swallowed hard. He dreaded the day he might not be able to work anymore. He hoped it would never come. "I'm excellent, I grant you, but there are plenty of others that can do my job and do it well. You've built an excellent team."

Jack snorted. "Stop with the flattery. I do have an excellent team. But you are my best, and you know it. There's a reason you're my favorite. Though if you tell anyone I said that I will deny it."

"Understood, Jack. I enjoy my work, and I appreciate your concern for my well-being."

It was good to hear that Jack valued his work. Hannibal knew he was good at his job, but it was always nice to know his work was appreciated. He'd worked hard to get this far and his career. He knew Jack was hoping he'd become an assistant director someday. At least he had before Hannibal had started zoning more often.

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose but his expression softened a bit, "You deserve a long and happy life. I don't want to see you dead, so you really need to do something about this. You know I'm right."

"I'm not sure what else I can do," Hannibal said with a shrug. He wasn't interested in bonding with just any compatible guide, and he'd made that clear to both Jack and the foundation in the past. Hannibal wouldn't let his circumstances change his wishes. This wasn't the first time Jack had encouraged him to find a guide, and Hannibal was honestly a little tired of having this conversation.

Jack glared at him pointedly and then opened a drawer and pulled out a fancy invitation. He tossed it onto the desk between them. Hannibal grimaced. He didn't need to look at it to know what it was. There was an exact replica sitting in his trash at home.

Jack pointed at him. "I know what you can do. There is a mixer for unbonded sentinels and guides coming up next week. The foundation always sends us extra invitations. I think you should go and see if you can find someone compatible. You know a bond is the only way to permanently fix your situation."

There was a little marble paperweight on the desk near him. Hannibal picked it up and examined it for a long moment before answering. Jack waited him out patiently.

"I know you're making sense, but you know I have no desire for a bond. As you know my parents agreed to bond for the wrong reasons. Their families insisted. They were technically a decent match, but they never should have bonded. They made each other and my sister and I miserable. When I came online, I promised myself I'd only accept a perfect match, and I haven't found one yet."

Jack nodded. "I understand, and I sympathize. I know that a perfect match is something every sentinel and guide longs for. But most sentinels and guide pairs aren't perfect matches, and they're happy together. I know I can't make you go, but all I'm asking is that you think about it. It won't hurt to give it a try. Worst case scenario, you're no better off at the end of the night than you are right now."

Hannibal sighed and leaned back in his chair. Hannibal privately acknowledged that Jack did have a point. He could zone permanently at any time. It could happen tomorrow, or it might not happen for years. It was possible new treatments would come along, but even that wouldn't be a guarantee. Not like a bond would be.

It had been a long time since he'd checked to see if he had any matches in the system. There had been a few in the past but no perfect match. He would have been notified if there had been. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to attend. This was the biggest mixer of the year, and there was also a silent auction that helped the foundation with its funding for the following year.

The sentinel and guide training centers had been run by the government until the late 8os when mismanagement and corruption led to the creation of an independent foundation. The Sentinel and Guide foundation was completely separate from the government. The foundation used the membership fees and donations it collected to fund its various programs. In any case, it would get Jack off his back about bonding, at least for a while. So that alone made it a worthwhile endeavor. Hannibal set down the paperweight.

"All right, I will attend, but I don't expect anything to come of it."

Jack clasped his hands together. "Excellent! I have a good feeling about this Hannibal. The mixer is this Saturday, and I'll give you Friday off as well."

He sighed and tapped his fingers against the desk. "What about the case?"

Jack sighed. "Well, if the unsub holds to his pattern, there won't be another murder for another three weeks, so it should be fine for you to take the time you need. If there's a development, then I'll have to call you in. Hopefully, that won't happen. Take the invitation."

Hannibal sighed but picked up the invitation. He stifled the urge to ball it up. “Fine. Is that all, sir?”

Jack gave a smile clearly satisfied. “That’s it. I can’t wait to hear all about it. Now get back to work.” Jack turned back to his paperwork without another word. Hannibal left the office, closing the door behind him. He walked back to his desk.

Andrea grinned when she saw the invitation in his hand. “Yes,” she pumped the air. “He convinced you to go. I’m so glad.”

Hannibal glared at her. “Yes, I just hope neither of you will be disappointed when nothing comes of it.

Andrea the look he was giving her. “Think positive!” she urged him. “You’d be a catch for any guide, you know. I mean, you’re an alpha. You’re smart, a good conversationalist, and you have a really nice ass.”

Hannibal almost missed his chair as he sat down at his desk. But he pretended nothing had happened and calmly turned to his desktop and hoped she couldn’t see he was flushing a little. He ignored Andrea’s giggle. “Thank you for that list of my attributes,” he said dryly. “Let’s get back to work.”

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Will Graham sat back in his chair as the last of his students filed out. He was glad this was the last class of the day. He looked around his classroom feeling pleased with the day’s work. The room was large with four rows of yoga mats evenly spaced on the floor and large windows that let in plenty of light. The space was calming.

It was one of Will’s favorite places in the world. He was always happy to work with his baby guides. Teaching had always been fulfilling for him. Unfortunately, he was physically and mentally exhausted by the end of the day. Keeping his shields strong and intact had never been easy for him. He’d had a conservator well into his twenties.

Now he managed pretty well on his own though crowds still weren’t the easiest for him to deal with. That was part of the reason why he was here. Blair Sandburg had worked with him to develop a couple of new techniques to help him strengthen his shields and they were taught to all new guides. Blair thought his past experiences would make him a good teacher and he’d been right.

Blair Sandburg had been like a mentor and father figure to Will since his own parents had died in a car accident when Will was eleven years old. He’d come online during the accident. Children coming online was quite rare, and it had been difficult for Will to adjust at first. His shields should have formed naturally, but they hadn’t. His empathy had been overwhelming. Blair and Jim Ellison came personally to help him adjust to his new circumstances, and they’d stayed in touch. They’d always been there for him, even after he’d moved to California to live with his grandmother. Will knew he was lucky to have both Jim and Blair in his life.

He stood and rubbed at his temples trying to fight off the oncoming headache. Just then, Blair came into the room. The Guide Prime of North America was in his early sixties, but Blair honestly looked ten years younger. He saw Will rubbing his temples and frowned in concern.

“Do you have a migraine? I thought you said the headaches weren’t that bad.”

Blair walked over to him and touched Will's temple and Will felt the pain recede to a dull throb. Blair looked him over closely. "I'm afraid that's the best I can do. Your shields are a bit thin at the moment. You should meditate for a while. Some time on the psionic plane will do you good."

Will breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, that's better. I'll mediate later, I promise. It really hasn't been that bad lately. But I've been here since six am. I'll go home and get behind my psionic generator for the rest of the night. I'll feel fine in the morning." It wasn't entirely true, but he would feel better, so it wasn't really a lie.

Blair raised an eyebrow. "Hmm, I have a feeling you're not being entirely honest with me, but I won't pry. I have a feeling that if Jim were here, he'd be calling you on it, but he's stuck in a meeting with someone from the DOD. They didn't need me, so I decided to save myself and get some work done here instead."

Will shook his head, but he smiled in amusement. "Jim is going to make you pay for that later. He hates going to those meetings alone."

Blair grinned. "I really hope so. It's usually fun." He wiggled his eyebrow at Will, who groaned.

He held up his hand. "Once again, I really don't need to know anything about your sex life, Blair. Is that why you came to see me?"

"I'm just saying," Blair said with a wave of his hand. Then his expression turned serious. "I came into Baltimore today because I wanted to talk to you. There's a mixer this weekend, and I want you to attend. Maybe you can find a match. Bonding would give you much better control over your shields, and it's been a couple of years since the last time you attended one."

Will groaned and shook his head. He'd suspected this was coming, but it had been long enough that he hoped Blair had finally given up.

He turned away and busied himself rolling up his yoga mat. "I told you I'm not interested in bonding. I like being on my own. Besides, the last time I tried it was a disaster."

He'd met Alana Bloom here at the Baltimore foundation. She was beautiful and kind, and Will had been instantly smitten. Their genetic profile said they were a good match for bonding. They'd dated for a couple of months, but it hadn't worked out. Alana had met her perfect match, and they'd bonded shortly thereafter. Will had been glad for Alana, but it had still been difficult for him. He'd genuinely cared for her. Will had met several more sentinels, but not one had felt right to him. He'd finally decided he wasn't going to get his hopes up again.

Blair sighed. "I know this isn't easy for you. Let's sit down. I want to talk." He led Will over to a couple of benches situated against one wall. They sat down, and Blair turned to look at him. "I know you were disappointed when you and Alana didn't bond but finding the right person takes at least five years on average. I wish you hadn't given up. I still think bonding could be very beneficial for you for many reasons. All I'm asking is for you to give it a try. If you don't find anyone then that's fine. You get to dress up and dance and have a little fun."

Will shook his head. "I wouldn't call any of those things fun." Will hated social events.

Blair laughed. "I know you wouldn't, but I do think it will be good for you to get out and meet some people. You work too much. Besides, there will be a couple of antique books at the auction. I know you'd like to see them."

“That is tempting,” Will admitted. He loved books of all kinds but especially antiques. He knew Blair worried for him. Blair cared about him and wanted him to be as happy and healthy as possible. Though he would never force Will to attend. The truth was that Will didn’t like disappointing him.

Blair covered Will’s hand with his own. “I wouldn’t push you anymore, but you should know I have a really good feeling about this,” Blair told him quietly

Will sighed. The magic words. Blair’s feelings tended to be significant, and it was never good to ignore them. He felt a stirring of hope despite himself. He supposed it wouldn’t hurt to do what Blair asked. He’d long since given up on a perfect match but that didn’t mean he couldn’t find someone he’d like to bond with. Maybe this time it would finally happen for him.

He stood up and started putting away the rest of the yoga mats. Blair got up to help. Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. Will knew from experience how patient Blair could be, and Blair would wait him out.

Once they were done with the mats, Will turned to Blair. He found Blair was looking at him expectantly. He wasn’t surprised Blair had always been able to read him well and he didn’t even need to use his empathy to do it either.

“Alright, I’ll go to the stupid mixer,” Will said with a sigh. He wasn’t at all surprised when Blair laughed and then gave him a tight hug. Blair’s shields were so good that Will couldn’t get any emotions off of him when they touched. Will let himself enjoy the feeling of safety Blair still gave him for a few seconds before he pulled away. Blair squeezed his arms once affectionately before stepping back.

“Good, I thought you would.” Blair was still grinning from ear to ear. Will smiled at Blair’s enthusiasm. It was contagious.

Blair bounced on his toes. “Okay, so we should get you a new tux.”

Will made a face, but he knew Blair was right. “Okay,” he agreed reluctantly.

“Good,” Blair said with a grin. “Come home with me, and you can spend the night. And in the morning, we’ll go shopping.” Blair said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Jim needs a new tux too.”

At least Will wouldn’t have to endure the shopping alone. He saw a flash of light out of the corner of his eye. Will looked toward the windows. He did a double-take because a stag was standing by the windows. The stag was translucent. Will could see the sunlight shining through the animal. He was looking right at Will. Will looked back, unable to take his eyes away from it. As he watched it grew more solid and pawed at the ground.

“What is it?” Blair turned to see what he was looking at. He turned back at Will. “What are you looking at?”

“You don’t see him?” Will asked, still not taking his eyes off the stag.

“No, what is it?” Blair asked, clearly confused. “I don’t feel anything either,” he said with a frown.

“A spirit animal. One I’ve never seen before.” Will walked over to the stag, and after a moment of hesitation, he touched the stag on the side. He gasped because the stag was solid and warm. Will

buried his fingers in the stag's fur. He heard Blair gasp behind him.

"I see him now," Blair said in a whisper. "He appeared as soon as you touched him."

The stag bent his head and nosed Will's face gently. At that moment, Will knew that the stag belonged to his sentinel. He wasn't sure how, but he was certain.

"You're very majestic," he told the stag. "My sentinel must be amazing." The stag nodded as if in agreement then nudged him again before disappearing in another flash of light.

Chapter 2

Check out the Art Post on WP

Hannibal looked at himself in the mirror as he buttoned his tuxedo jacket. He admitted to himself that the tuxedo looked very good on him. The mixer was starting in an hour and Hannibal wasn't looking forward to it. Still, he supposed he should leave now to make sure he wasn't late. The sooner he got there the sooner he could leave. He took one final look at himself and nodded. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be," Hannibal muttered to himself.

Hannibal walked out to his car and got inside. Just as he started the engine there was a flash of light. He gasped as a magnificent black wolf appeared right in front of the car. The wolf turned to stare at him. He looked solid. Hannibal just continued to stare in shock for a moment. He prided himself on being unflappable, but this was not an everyday occurrence. Spirit guides didn't visit Earth often. The wolf was quite a sight.

His spirit guide was a stag, so the wolf belonged to someone else. Hannibal had rarely seen his own spirit guide let alone anyone else's, and he wasn't sure what it meant. He made a mental note to investigate it later. As he watched the wolf howled once and then disappeared. Hannibal continued to stare for a moment before driving away.

He arrived at the hotel. The night's events were being held in the ballroom. Once inside he made his way up the grand staircase that led to the ballroom. There were already a lot of people milling around. He went to a table and found his name tag and table assignment before going to the bar to get a drink.

Then for the next two hours he walked around shaking hands with people. Luckily, there were several people that he recognized, and he conversed easily with them. A couple of people found a match and excused themselves quickly to loud applause from the crowd. He wondered if he should have yet another drink when Beverly Katz walked over to him with two glasses of wine. She was an unbonded sentinel like him. She handed him a glass, and he took a sip gratefully.

"You're my favorite person," he told her.

"I bet you say that to all the people who bring you wine. You looked like you could use it." She looked him up and down openly and gave a low whistle. "Wow, you clean up nice. Not that you don't always look perfectly put together. It's so annoying." She winked at him.

Hannibal looked her over as well. She wore a dark red evening gown. "You look stunning as well." He took her hand in his and kissed the back of it. "Any guide here would be lucky to have you."

"Thank you, Hannibal. That's so sweet of you to say." She leaned in and smiled conspiratorially. "One thing I never get used to at these things is being stared at by so many people. I swear I feel like I'm on display."

"I think that's the point of this," Hannibal said, and Beverly laughed.

"Too true. I've already escaped to the terrace a couple of times for some fresh air." Beverly pointed toward a large set of doors at the far side of the room. He could see some people walking in and out. Suddenly freedom seemed at hand. Even just a few minutes alone would be a welcome respite.

"I think that's a fine idea. Would you like to join me?"

She shook her head. "No, I think I'm going to sit down. These shoes are already killing me."

"In that case, let's find you a seat." Hannibal held out his arm, and she took it with a smile. He led her back to her table, and then after some small talk, he excused himself. He gave his empty glass to a waiter and made his way onto the terrace. Only a few people were standing outside.

Hannibal moved to the far side of the terrace away from them. He took a deep breath of the fresh summer air. It was a lovely evening. The smell of the roses from the garden was strong but pleasant. Then he caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and he turned and saw the wolf again. He was standing on the steps leading down to the garden. Hannibal looked around, but it seemed that no one else could see the animal. The wolf was staring at him, and he suddenly felt like he wanted Hannibal to follow him. The wolf turned and loped down the steps then stopped at the bottom and howled again.

Hannibal didn't even think before he followed the wolf down the stairs. The wolf led him down a path around some trees to a lovely fountain. It was hidden behind the trees, and Hannibal knew it couldn't be seen from the terrace. He was surprised to see his stag standing by the fountain. He looked surprisingly solid, just like the wolf.

The wolf went over to the stag and bumped his leg with his nose. The stag bent his head down, and they touched noses before the wolf wrapped itself around the stag's legs. They looked very comfortable together.

He heard a soft gasp. Hannibal turned to see the man staring at him with wide eyes. He was sitting on the edge of the fountain. Hannibal stared at the man intently unable to look away. He couldn't believe he hadn't seen him right away. Hannibal noticed his eyes were a beautiful shade of blue. Hannibal felt as if he could drown in those eyes. Hannibal felt drawn to him in a way he'd never felt before. The man was still but he watched Hannibal avidly.

Hannibal couldn't help but walk toward him, drawn like a moth to a flame. He felt like his feet were moving almost of their own volition. When he was standing directly in front of the other man he stopped, and their eyes met and held. He knew instantly that the man was a guide and that he was a match for Hannibal. Hannibal couldn't believe that this was happening.

"Hi," the other man said softly. He gave an awkward wave that Hannibal found adorable.

His face was a little flushed, and Hannibal could hear the rapid beat of his heart. Hannibal quickly memorized the sound. From now on, he'd know the beat of this guide's heart anywhere.

His guide. He inhaled deeply and he could pick out the scent of his guide easily despite the roses surrounding them. He smelled of lavender, sandalwood, and something else unique to him. It was incredible. Hannibal took a deep breath committing the scent to memory.

"I'm Will Graham, and I don't know who you are, but I do know you're the one I've been waiting for. My sentinel." Will's voice shook a little.

Hannibal closed his eyes for a moment and let the sound of Will's voice wash over him. His voice was beautiful, one of the sweetest sounds Hannibal had ever heard. Hannibal felt as if he could listen to Will speak forever.

He'd always heard it was like this when a sentinel or guide met a particularly good match. A part of him hadn't really believed that he'd see a guide and be instantly drawn to them. He'd never been so happy to be wrong. He'd finally met his guide and he wasn't going to let this chance pass him by.

Hannibal took a deep breath and found his voice. "Hello, Will. My name is Hannibal Lecter. I agree. I do belong to you. And you to me. I'm so pleased to meet you. I've been waiting for you for a long time."

Will blushed again and gave him a bright smile. "So have I. Been waiting for you, I mean." Will held out his hand, and Hannibal took it gently pulling Will to his feet. They stood their neither letting go for a long moment.

Without thinking, Hannibal put his hand on Will's cheek. It shook a bit, but Hannibal ignored it. Hannibal was pleased when Will immediately leaned into the touch with a sigh.

"Wow, just your hand on my cheek feels insanely good. This is so weird. Incredible but weird."

"Well, I feel as if I could happily drown in your eyes, so I think we're in the same boat," Hannibal informed him dryly. They both laughed. His guide's laugh washed over him. It was a beautiful sound. Hannibal reluctantly lowered his hand. He could still feel the warmth of Will's skin on his fingertips.

Will took a deep breath. “Okay, I wasn’t looking to find a match tonight, though I was hoping. But I didn’t know it would be like this. I already feel a need to be close to you. To be honest, I don’t think I realized how unbearably lonely I truly felt until this moment.”

Hannibal nodded. He understood completely. “I agree. Everyone I know has been encouraging me to bond, but I was sure I was fine on my own.”

“Yeah, I experienced pretty much the same thing. I think we would have been fine if we never met, but I’m glad I didn’t miss out on meeting you. I can’t imagine going back now.”

Hannibal knew he was smiling from ear to ear. “I think I owe my boss a thank you for encouraging me to come tonight.”

Will chuckled softly as he moved closer to Hannibal. Hannibal could feel the heat of his body. “I think I owe him a thank you as well. What is it that you do?”

“I’m an FBI agent. I work for the BAU.” Hannibal said.

Will’s eyes widened. “Oh, that’s exciting. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you’re in law enforcement.” Will said. “I’m so happy you listened to him,” he added.

“Me too.” They just stood there staring at one another for a long moment. The silence stretched between them, but it wasn’t uncomfortable.

Then Will turned to look at their spirit animals still entwined. “I take it the stag is yours. Until today, I’d never seen him before, but this is the second time he’s visited me. I had a feeling he belonged to my sentinel. I’m glad I was right.”

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed. “I saw your wolf this afternoon as well, and then he appeared to me just now. I knew I had to follow him. I listened to my instincts, and I must say I’m delighted with the result.”

Will blushed a little and held out his hand. Hannibal took it, lacing their fingers together. His skin tingled wherever they touched. Will licked his bottom lip and Hannibal wished he could kiss him, but he knew it was too soon.

“There’s a part of me that wants to bond with you right this second,” Will admitted. Hannibal admired his honesty. He looked at Hannibal but then his eyes darted away. He looked nervous. Perhaps he was afraid that Hannibal would disagree.

“I would not be opposed to that at all,” Hannibal assured him quickly. “But I wouldn’t mind getting to know each other a little first either. Whatever makes you more comfortable is fine with me. Just being close to you is enough for now.” It was the complete truth.

Will appeared to be thinking about what he’d said. “I honestly can’t see walking away from you, but I think getting to know each other would be good. I want to know everything about you.”

“I feel the same.” This would be awkward or strange in another circumstance, but sentinels and guides often bonded quickly. Hannibal could already feel the connection growing between them. The need to bond with Will already making itself known. He was confident that Will was the right guide for him, and that was a wonderful feeling. Mundanes sometimes mistook sentinels and

guides for soulmates. Hannibal had always found the comparison rather inane. But right now, it did feel like he and Will were destined to be together.

Hannibal gestured toward the fountain. “I think we do have a lot to talk about. Shall we sit and get to know one another?”

Will waved a hand indicating their surroundings. “Actually, this garden is beautiful at night. Why don’t we walk for a while?”

Hannibal agreed, and they began to stroll through the rose garden, hand in hand. They were on a stone path with old-fashioned-looking lanterns. There were many different varieties of rose bushes arranged around the path where they walked. It was very romantic, and Hannibal saw why it was a popular wedding venue.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, but Hannibal didn’t mind. He was serious when he told Will that just being near him was enough for him for the moment. Here with Will, he felt more centered than he ever had in his life, and they weren’t even bonded yet.

Will made a little thoughtful noise but didn’t say anything else. He smelled pleased, though. Hannibal suddenly wanted to know what he was thinking.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Hannibal asked.

Will raised an eyebrow, but then he smiled softly. “I was just thinking we’re clearly a good match. I wonder why the foundation didn’t notify us. I definitely would have agreed to meet you if they had.”

Hannibal frowned and cleared his throat. He didn’t want to tell Will the truth, but he knew he had to. “We must not be a perfect genetic match. I asked to only be notified of perfect matches.”

Will flinched and let go of his hand. “Oh, I see. I understand why you’d want a perfect match. I know how powerful and special a perfect match is. I would never want you to feel like you were settling.” Will looked away from him. Hannibal’s stomach twisted. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt this man.

Before he could speak, the wolf rose off the ground and growled clearly displeased as well. Will stared at their spirit animals. Then he shook his head. “He’s upset on my behalf. I can’t get used to them interacting with us like this.”

“It is disconcerting. Until now, I’d only seen my stag the day I came online.”

The wolf was still growling. Will knelt down and gently patted the wolf’s side. “It’s okay, buddy. I promise.” He looked up at Hannibal. “He feels pretty solid. Just like your stag does. If they can interact with us like this, I wonder why they don’t do it more often.”

Hannibal nodded, but he was surprised as well. Spirit animals were typically relatively insubstantial outside of the psionic plane. It was hard for them to manifest on Earth. “I’m not sure, but it is interesting.” Hannibal smiled ruefully at Will. “He’s clearly upset that I hurt you.”

Will looked down at the wolf and continued to pat him. “It’s fine. You didn’t really hurt me. I was just surprised.” The wolf was calming down and he leaned into Will’s touch.

“No, it isn’t. I want you to know I meant it when I said I already feel connected to you. When I made the request, I never expected to feel this way about any guide, but certainly not one who isn’t my perfect match. I had my reasons for that. I hope you’ll let me explain.” Hannibal inclined his head toward the wolf. “May I?” he asked.

After a short pause Will nodded. “Go ahead. I think he will allow it. Your stag seems to like me.”

Hannibal smiled at Will. “He obviously has good taste.” Hannibal bent down and patted the wolf. He was pleased when the wolf allowed it and even leaned into his hand. The wolf did indeed feel solid. He looked at the wolf but addressed Will. “I can see now that it was wrong of me to limit myself to perfect matches. I deeply regret my decision now as it kept us from meeting sooner.”

“Why did you?” Will looked at him intently, but he waited patiently for Hannibal to speak.

Hannibal took a moment to gather his thoughts and then explained about his parents and how he’d come to his decision.

Will made a sympathetic noise and touched Hannibal’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Hannibal. That sounds like an awful way to grow up. I can understand why you would be concerned and want the best possible match for yourself.” Will stood, and Hannibal followed suit. The wolf rolled in the grass.

“I had stopped trying to find a match too. I was tired of being disappointed,” Will said. He put his hands in his pockets.

“I can understand that as well. I think our circumstances are surprisingly similar in a lot of ways.” There wasn’t a sentinel or guide alive who didn’t know the disappointment of not finding a match.

Will looked back at him and smiled again, and Hannibal’s heart skipped a beat. He was so beautiful. Suddenly, desire for Will rushed over him, but Hannibal ruthlessly ignored it for the moment. It was too soon.

Will waved his hand toward the path. “Come on, let’s keep walking.” They started strolling again. Hannibal was relieved that Will understood why he was so determined to find a perfect match even though they were somewhat rare. He’d honestly never expected to find a guide with whom he’d felt this kind of connection. But he’d never been happier to be wrong.

Hannibal felt something bump his back and he stopped and then turned. He saw that his stag was following closely behind him. Will stopped next to him and gave a soft giggle. Hannibal frowned and pointed the way they had come. “Go away if you can’t behave.” The stag glared at him for a moment, but then he disappeared.

Will started at the spot where the stag had stood for a moment. “Wow. He listened to you. That’s incredible.” He made a thoughtful sound. “You know, I think I’m going to miss him. He’s very comforting.”

“Something tells me he’ll be back,” Hannibal said with a shrug. The wolf nudged Will with his snout, and then he disappeared as well.

Will sighed. “I hope so. I like having them around.” He turned to look at a nearby rose bush. He made a surprised noise. He held up a hand “Wait a moment.” He walked over to the closest rose

bush and then took a Swiss army knife from his pocket. He cut a rose and then handed it to Hannibal a bit shyly. Then he put the knife back in his pocket.

“This is a bleu magenta rose. It doesn’t have any thorns, so you don’t have to worry about pricking your finger.”

Hannibal knew his cheeks were also a little pink. No one had ever given him flowers before, and he found he was pleased by the gesture. “Thank you. It’s lovely.” Hannibal took it and breathed deeply. Then he took Will’s hand once again.

Hannibal looked down at the rose in his hand. “You know, I have to imagine my parents must have been barely compatible because while we might not be a perfect match, we must be close. In fact, I find it hard to believe we aren’t a perfect match. This is the kind of connection our people dream of. Or at least it feels that way to me. I can’t imagine walking away from you unless you decide you don’t want me.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that.” Will leaned into Hannibal laced their fingers together again. “It’s all I can do not to reach for you mentally right now. As soon as I saw you, I knew that psionically we’re going to be an excellent match. I’m glad I waited or else we never would have met.”

Hannibal’s stomach twisted unpleasantly. The idea of never meeting Will or worse of being bonded to someone else first was too terrible to contemplate.

Will bit his lip and stopped walking. He turned toward Hannibal. “I should tell you I still have some trouble maintaining my shields even now. Especially in large crowds and if I have to be in a crowded space for hours. My empathy is powerful, and often people’s emotions leak through.”

“Is the crowd too much for you?” Hannibal asked, concerned. He looked at Will closely for any signs of strain. There was a large crowd here tonight. He hated the idea that his guide might be suffering, but he hadn’t detected the scent of pain on Will.

Will shook his head. “No, I’m good. A little uncomfortable but nothing I can’t handle,” Will assured him. “I’d come out here to be by myself for a bit and get some space. But I was about to go back inside when your stag appeared. I guess he wanted to make sure I stayed where I was. I’m glad I did.”

Will gave a small smile and then kissed Hannibal on the cheek.

Hannibal resisted the urge to touch the spot where Will had kissed him. The feeling of his lips still lingered. “Well, since we’re sharing our issues. I should tell you I’ve been having problems with zoning and my senses have been going somewhat haywire. Things like even quiet sounds suddenly being way too loud. That’s one of the reasons I agreed to come tonight.”

Will reached up and touched Hannibal’s cheek. “I’m sorry to hear you’ve been zoning. But it seems like we’ll be able to help each other then.”

“Yes, indeed it does.”

He covered Will’s hand with his own. “You are beautiful,” he whispered.

“So are you,” Will whispered back, and Hannibal chuckled in response.

Hannibal leaned down and brushed his lips against Will's gently. Will surprised him a little by deepening the kiss, parting his lips against Hannibal's. Their tongues met. As they kissed, the whole world faded away, and Hannibal felt like he was drowning in sensation. Desire raced through him as Will gave a little moan. He could smell his guide's arousal. Hannibal was engulfed by the scent and taste of Will Graham, and he knew he'd enjoy spending the rest of his life kissing him. Finally, Hannibal moved back a little, but they didn't pull away from each other completely.

"That was wow," Will said softly.

Hannibal put his hand on Will's back, still holding him close. "Yes, it was." Hannibal took Will's hand in his and kissed his palm. "Full disclosure, I think I've already started to imprint on you. So, if you're not sure about bonding yet, then I think we should go our separate ways until we have time to think about things."

Will leaned his head on Hannibal's shoulder and sighed. Hannibal put his arms around him and kissed the top of his head. "I could really get used to this. I don't need more time to think. I already know I want this."

Hannibal could hear the truth in Will's words. They were in complete agreement. He tightened his arms around Will. "I feel the same," he assured Will.

Will sighed happily, "Good. I'm glad we're on the same page. I've been thinking. If I'm going to work with you in the field, then I'll have to go to Quantico. I can get certified as a field guide pretty easily while I work on becoming an agent. I already have a master's in psychology, and I've always wanted to work on another one. I think Criminal Justice would be interesting and useful."

Hannibal was humbled by Will's willingness to rearrange his life for him. They would both have to adjust, but Hannibal was already sure he'd never regret having Will in his life. When an Agent bonded their partner had to take classes to get my certification for fieldwork with the FBI, which included weapons training, but not all of them took the time to become full-time field agents

"All that sounds great. But you don't have to do this if you don't want to. Once we're bonded, I don't think I'll zone. If I did, your voice would probably be enough to bring me out of it."

Will raised his head and met Hannibal's eyes. "You don't want me with you?" He sounded hurt.

Hannibal shook his head. "Of course, I want you with me," he said emphatically. "But I want you to know I don't expect you to give up everything for me. Your happiness and well-being are my primary concerns. You said your work is important to you."

"It is. It's important to me," Will acknowledged again. "But you're more important. Besides, I've been looking for a change. I love teaching, but the thought of going out into the field with you and using my degree is exciting."

"All right, if you're sure, then I'm thrilled to have you working with me," Hannibal said.

"I am," Will assured him. "I'll need time to find someone to replace me at the foundation. But I've always found profiling interesting. I've read several books on it. I think that I could be excellent at this type of work."

Hannibal wanted to shout with joy. "I wouldn't be surprised at all. I think we're on the same page then. There are many other things to work out, but we have time. We can take the time and get to

know one another before we bond, or we can bond right now tonight. Whatever you feel more comfortable with."

Will leaned forward and kissed him again. Slow and sweet. Hannibal surrendered to it and to the desire that Will inspired. He let Will take the lead and control the kiss. Hannibal wasn't usually one to give up control, but with Will, it was easy. They melted into each other, and Hannibal lost track of how long they kissed. He could smell the scent of Will's arousal, and it was intoxicating. His own arousal rose in response. Will pulled away first, giving Hannibal one last quick kiss.

They were both breathing a little hard. Will closed his eyes for a moment and then looked up at Hannibal, his eyes dark with need. "I do have something we should discuss before things go any further. The second kiss was even better than the first. I'm attracted to you. In fact, I can't believe how much I want you already. It's not something I was expecting. At least not this soon.

Will rubbed the back of his neck. "Usually, I have to get to know someone before I'm attracted to them. Even though I'm attracted to you, I would like to wait to have sex until we know each other a little better. I've always preferred to have an emotional connection with a partner before sex, and I think a bond will give us that. But I'd like to take a few days at least before any physical intimacy."

Hannibal took a deep breath to get himself under control and he nodded. "Thank you for telling me. I have no problem with that at all. I do hate the idea of being apart from you though. I would like to spend as much time together as possible. We can wait for as long as you need." He ran his hand along Will's back soothingly.

Will shivered slightly and took a deep breath before stepping back out of Hannibal's arms. Hannibal reluctantly let him go. "Thank you, and we totally agree on the not being apart thing."

Hannibal chuckled. "Thank God for that."

Will squared his shoulders and looked determined. "I don't see any reason to wait on the bond. I'm sure this is the right move for us. I think we could help each other out, and this…us just feels right. So right that I agree with you. I'm honestly shocked we aren't a perfect match. I'd like to bond tonight if you feel ready as well."

Hannibal's heart felt as if it stopped for a moment, and he stared at Will. Then a rush of joy washed over him again, and he threw his head back and laughed. He really didn't know how he'd gotten this lucky. "Yes, I'd be thrilled to bond with you tonight. I can take you home or we can go to my place if you'd be more comfortable."

Will chuckled too, his eyes shining with happiness. But he shook his head. "My place is tiny. Let's go to yours. I'm sure it's more comfortable for your senses. Plus, I like the idea of being in your space. It feels right." I have to admit I'm genuinely curious to see what your home is like. I bet it's a nice house."

Hannibal nodded. "It is. I hope you like it." He'd be willing to change anything in his home that Will didn't like.

"I'm sure I will," Will said. Together they walked back toward the hotel.

Chapter 3

As they reached the top of the stairs and stepped onto the terrace, Hannibal was surprised to see Blair Sandburg and Jim Ellison waiting for them.

He watched as Sandburg looked Will over clearly concerned. “Are you okay?” he asked. “You were gone for a long time.” He must have noticed Hannibal’s hand on Will’s back because he smiled and raised one eyebrow at them both.

Hannibal looked between them. Clearly, they knew one another quite well. Hannibal wasn’t that surprised. After all, Will worked at the foundation, but they seemed to be more than just work colleagues. Clearly, they were friends.

“I’m fine,” Will assured Blair. “This is Hannibal Lecter. He’s a good match for me,” Will told Sandburg. “As much as I hate to say it, you were right.”

Blair’s face split into a huge smile. “Excellent, I had a feeling you’d find your sentinel tonight. I’m so happy for you.”

“And to be right,” Will pointed out dryly, and Blair just shrugged unrepentantly.

Jim Ellison had been observing them silently. He looked at Will. “You’re sure about this?”

Will nodded. ‘Yes, I’m sure Jim, he’s the one.”

“Okay then,” Jim raised one eyebrow. “Are you going to introduce us?”

Will blushed. “Yes, of course.” Will made the introductions, and they all shook hands.

“I’m pleased to meet you both,” Hannibal said sincerely. At any other time, he’d be a little star-struck about meeting the Alpha Primes of North America. Each man was both a legend in his own right and as a pair. However, he was impatient for them to be on their way.

Will took Hannibal’s hand. “We’re leaving now,” Will told them. “I’ve asked Hannibal to bond with me, and he’s agreed.”

Blair’s eyes widened a little, but he nodded. “I’m a little surprised you’re jumping in so quickly, but I trust your decision. When the match is right, you just know.”

“Yes,” Will agreed simply. “I can’t imagine wanting anyone else.”

Blair did a fist pump, making them all laugh. “This is great. We have to head back to D.C., but I’ll call you in a couple of days. Let me know if you need anything. Remember to go to the foundation tomorrow and register your bond.” Then Blair grinned at his husband. “I knew he’d find your sentinel tonight. I just knew it!”

Jim smiled. “Yes, dear,” he agreed.

Will smiled fondly at Blair. “Yes, you did. Thank you for pushing me to come tonight.” He gave both Jim and Blair a hug. After saying their goodbyes, they headed to Hannibal’s car. As they walked, Hannibal couldn’t contain his curiosity.

“How do you know Sandburg and Ellison?” he asked.

“I’ve known them since I was eleven,” Will replied.

“Really, how did that come about?” He put his arm around Will’s waist, and Will leaned into his side.

Will told him about coming online at a young age and his problems maintaining his shields around large groups of people. Hannibal suddenly realized who Will was. He’d never known the boy’s name since his identity had been protected. Still, the fact that an eleven-year-old guide had come online was well known in their community. A child coming online wasn’t ever easy for them. However, Hannibal was glad to know Will had been protected and given the care and training he needed. Their community protected their children zealously.

“Luckily, my paternal grandmother was able to take custody of me. She was loving and very protective of me. She died last year. A massive heart attack.” Hannibal could hear the pain and sadness in Will’s voice. He wanted to ease it.

“I’m so sorry,” Hannibal said sincerely. “My parents died when I was young as well. We have that in common. My sister and I were raised by my uncle. Mischa lives in California now. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to meet you. She’s going to be ecstatic. I finally bonded.”

Suddenly Hannibal couldn’t wait for them to meet. He thought they’d get along well. It had been just the two of them for so long. His sister didn’t seem inclined to get married. But he knew she’d welcome Will as another brother.

“I’d love to meet her too. I’ve always wanted siblings. It was lonely growing up especially after my parents died. Being an online guide at eleven was difficult. Blair Sandburg himself helped to train me in maintaining my shields. And after I got my master’s, he asked me to come back to the foundation and teach.”

“I’m glad you had them to support you along with your grandmother,” Hannibal said.

“Me too. Jim and Blair helped me become the person I am today.”

Hannibal rubbed his finger over Will’s wrist. “Then I’m grateful because I already know that you’re wonderful.”

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When Hannibal pulled up in front of his house, Will stared startled for a long moment. It was a large and beautiful house. He honestly hadn’t given any thought to Hannibal’s finances. He was pretty sure an FBI agent didn’t make the kind of money that would allow them to live in a place like this. Still, it was the kind of place he would have expected Hannibal to live if he’d given it some thought. There was something about his sentinel that spoke of a love of fine things and the means to buy them.

Something must have shown on his face because Hannibal grinned at him. “I inherited a lot of money from my uncle. I only work because I enjoy it and because I’d go crazy with nothing to do.”

Will turned in the seat so he could see him better. “It’s a gorgeous house. If you don’t need to work, what made you decide to join the FBI?” He was genuinely curious.

Hannibal turned, mirroring his position. “I was going to be a doctor – a surgeon actually. That was always my plan. Then I came online in my first year of residency, and something in me fundamentally changed. I found that the work of a doctor wasn’t something I enjoyed anymore. I felt the need to protect people more directly.”

“That’s very common for sentinels,” Will said quietly.

“Yes, it is,” Hannibal said with a nod. “I didn’t really understand why until I came online myself, and it’s instinctual. I think it’s built into us.”

Will covered Hannibal’s hand with his own. “Yes, I understand what you mean. I think guides feel that way to a certain extent, but perhaps not as strongly as sentinels.”

“Do you ever regret not becoming a surgeon?’ Will asked.

“No,” Hannibal said. “I’m quite happy with my chosen path in life. I enjoy what I do.”

Will nodded. He was glad to hear it. “So, what is your degree in?” Though he understood what drove Hannibal to choose a different career it was still a huge change. It couldn’t have been easy for him.

“I decided to go into psychology. It’s always been one of my interests, and I thought it would help me in whatever career I eventually chose.”

Will nodded. That had been a sensible plan. Will appreciated well thought out decisions. He had a feeling Hannibal was always careful in his decisions, and Will really liked that. Will needed

structure in his daily life. There were so many things he liked about Hannibal. He also loved the sound of Hannibal's voice and the feel of Hannibal's mouth on his. He kept a running list of everything he liked about Hannibal in his head, and he looked forward to adding to it as they got to know one another. He'd happily add the things he disliked as well. He was looking forward to getting to know everything about his sentinel after they bonded.

"I'm glad you were able to find a career you enjoy in the FBI. Later, I'd like to hear all about how you ended up there." He gestured toward the house. "Shall we go inside?"

"Yes," Hannibal agreed, and without another word, they went inside. He had the most beautiful hazel eyes. Will felt as if he could get lost in them.

Once they were inside, Will looked around curiously. They were standing in a large foyer. The floor was marble, and a large fireplace was across from the door.

"Follow me. The bedrooms are upstairs."

Will looked around. There was a wide archway that led into another room. Hannibal led him through the door and into an elegant living room.

He looked over at Hannibal and found him watching Will, no doubt waiting for his reaction. "From what I've seen so far, the house is incredible. I can't wait to see the house, but I think that can wait for tomorrow."

Hannibal swallowed hard. "I'm glad you like my home, but I agree. A tour can wait." He was looking at Will like he was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen, and Will's pulse sped up.

Hannibal took Will's hand and kissed it. "I'm delighted to have you here in my home, Will. I'm honored that you wish to bond with me. I promise I will treasure you for the rest of our lives.

Will felt tears prickle his eyes. God, his sentinel was incredible. "I feel the same. I can't wait to bond with you. Where would you like to do this?" he asked. He didn't try to hide his impatience.

"Tell me what would be best for the bonding?"

Will thought about it for a moment. "It would be easiest if we could sit close to one another. Lying down might even be better. We don't know how long it will take to complete the bond and we need to be able to touch skin to skin."

Hannibal motioned toward the stairs. It was a grand staircase. There was no other word for it. "We can go to my bedroom if that's comfortable for you. If not, we can go to one of the guest rooms."

Will's stomach twisted with anticipation at the idea of being in Hannibal's bed. He wasn't sorry he'd asked to wait to have sex. He knew it was the right move for him, but a part of him wished he was the type to just jump into sex right away. But there would be time for that. He was glad that Hannibal didn't seem to mind waiting. Will figured it wouldn't be long before he was ready.

Hannibal led him up the stairs, his hand firmly on Will's back. Another thing he liked was the way that Hannibal couldn't seem to stop touching him, and the feeling was absolutely mutual. Hannibal made him feel like he was the most important person in the world.

As they reached the top of the stairs Will realized they were standing in a long hallway. He could see several closed doors on either side, and he wondered just how many rooms this place had. The carpet felt soft and thick under his feet.

Hannibal led him into an exquisitely appointed bedroom with a king-sized bed against one wall. Across from the bed was another fireplace. There were two comfortable chairs in front of the fireplace. The window was directly across from the door. The room was painted in dark blue and grey. It had a very masculine feel, and it was very Hannibal. Being in his sentinel's home felt right. He felt comfortable here. More comfortable than he'd ever felt anywhere else.

Hannibal took off his jacket, and Will did the same. Will watched a little amused as Hannibal carefully draped the jackets over the back of a chair.

"We should take our shirts. Touching skin to skin will help." Will started taking off his shirt.

Hannibal took his clothes off without another word. Will watched him enjoying the sight of Hannibal's bare chest. This time Will hung up his clothes up himself. Hannibal gave him a big smile as he did so. Once they were both stripped down to their pants, Will touched Hannibal's chest over his heart. Hannibal covered his hands with his own. Will let his gaze rake over Hannibal's body. He felt desire stirring. This time it didn't surprise him. Maybe after the bond, he wouldn't want to wait anymore.

"You are gorgeous. I can't believe I got this lucky. Since the moment I saw you, it was all I could do not to lower my shields and reach for you. I can't wait to feel your mind touching mine," Will said earnestly.

Hannibal smiled, and it was so beautiful it took Will's breath away. Again. He wondered if it would happen every single time. He hoped so.

"I can't either," Hannibal said softly.

Hannibal didn't move. He just stood there watching Will. He realized Hannibal was waiting for Will to come to him. He appreciated Hannibal's decision to go at Will's pace. It was very sweet. Will lay down on the bed, tucking a pillow under his head. Then he patted the bed. "Come here."

Hannibal didn't need to be asked twice because he walked around the other side of the bed and moved close to Will before lying down. He lay on his side facing Will. He was watching Will intently as if Will was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen. Will shivered under his gaze. He found that he enjoyed being the center of Hannibal's attention.

He moved closer until they were pressed close together. This wasn't strictly necessary, but it would make things easier. He kissed Hannibal gently. Hannibal put his arms around him. It felt amazing to be touching Hannibal like this.

"I didn't realize how much of a tease this part of the process is," he told Hannibal. Hannibal laughed, clearly happy. The sound and the emotion washed over Will.

"It is, but I do not mind, believe me," Hannibal assured him. "I've laughed and smiled more tonight than I have in a long time." He ran his hand along Will's side. "I can't wait to see what the future has in store for us."

Will put his hand over Hannibal's heart, and Hannibal covered his hand with his own. "The process of forming a bond isn't difficult, especially if the sentinel and guide are compatible. I'm going to lower my shield and reach out with my mind. I'll connect our minds. Once our minds are connected the bond should begin to form on its own. Our psionic energy wants to be joined. Our minds will wrap around each other and lock the bond in place between us."

Hannibal nodded. He ran his finger over Will's lips. "I understand. I'm ready when you are."

Will nodded and lowered his shield. His mind was completely open for the first time since he'd first come online.

He touched Hannibal's mind gently and was pleased when Hannibal responded eagerly. Their minds touched and connected with no effort. The ease of the joining was startling. Will wrapped his mind around Hannibal's so that he couldn't tell where he began or Hannibal ended. For a moment, he felt as if he was drowning in Hannibal. He felt his sentinel's pleasure and profound relief at no longer being alone. Will was safe wrapped up in Hannibal's mental embrace. It was perfect.

Will felt the bond begin to form. A sense of belonging filled Will. He focused, and in his mind's eye Will saw their bond spring to life between them tying them together. It looked like a length of rope, but it sparkled and pulsed with psionic energy. It formed easily. Will barely had to help it along.

Their shields expanded and wrapped around each other's minds in layers, safe and secure. *You're amazing*. Hannibal's mental voice brushed delicately against Will's mind, making him shiver with the pleasure of their connection.

So are you. Will said and he felt Hannibal's own pleasure reflected back at him.

It won't always feel like this, will it? Hannibal asked. *Because if I feel this every time we talk telepathically, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to concentrate.*

No, once we separate, it won't feel like this. Right now, we have a feedback loop thing going on. But we'll still enjoy touching each other's minds.

Will felt Hannibal's amusement. *'Feedback loop thing.' You have a way of phrasing things that I find charming. I'm both relieved and a little disappointed to hear that.* Hannibal admitted. *But our bond feels amazing. I know I want this for the rest of my life. I don't ever want to go back to being alone.*

That was very romantic, and Will knew Hannibal could feel how much it pleased him. *I feel the same*, he assured Hannibal, and Hannibal's own happiness washed over him again in a way. He had been a little worried that they wouldn't grow to love one another, but he knew that worry had been unfounded. How could he not grow to love this man? They really were destined for one another. Will wished they could stay like this forever. But he knew they could connect like this whenever they wanted.

I'm going to separate us now. The shields should remain in place without much effort on either of our parts. From now on, we'll be able to sense each other and communicate with each other through the bond.

Hannibal agreed, and Will slowly pulled his mind away until they were completely separate again.

He opened his eyes to find Hannibal watching him, a broad smile on his face. “I never imagined this would feel so good. I feel complete, whole. Like something I’ve always been missing has finally been returned to me.”

Will smiled. “I feel the same way. You are everything I need. Sentinel.”

“Guide,” Hannibal replied. He gazed at Will, his eyes warm with affection. “I will always be your refuge and a safe harbor in any storm.”

Will felt tears well up in his eyes. Hannibal was a comforting and vibrant presence at the back of his mind. He felt safe and cherished. “Yes, neither of us will ever be alone again.”

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